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AP Literature
Teaching Unit**

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Barbara Kingsolver's
The Bean Trees

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Teaching Unit

The Bean Trees

by Barbara Kingsolver

written by Priscilla Baker



Prestwick House

Item No. 307248

The Bean Trees

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. explain the significance of the novel title, *The Bean Trees*, and of the chapter titles.
2. discuss the role of narrative voice and analyze Kingsolver's use of point of view.
3. discuss the credibility of the narrator and how that is measured.
4. analyze the use of humor and sarcasm in the novel.
5. discuss the function of setting and the role of nature in the novel.
6. examine the impact of the social and political issues present in the novel on plot, character, and theme.
7. identify, discuss, and support the novel's major themes.
8. trace the development of symbols in the novel and explain their relevance and meaning.
9. explain the effects of the literary and rhetorical devices used in the novel.
10. trace the character development of the novel's protagonist, Taylor, and evaluate in what respects she can be considered a hero.
11. discuss the novel as a feminist piece of literature.
12. respond to multiple choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
13. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.

Introductory Lecture

Barbara Kingsolver was born on April 8, 1955 in Annapolis, Maryland. She spent some of her childhood in Africa where her father was a medical doctor but essentially grew up in eastern Kentucky.

Kingsolver attended DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana on a music scholarship but eventually changed her major to biology. She studied biology and ecology at the University of Arizona in Tucson for graduate school and received a Masters in Science degree. Though she took only one creative writing course while there, Kingsolver decided to pursue a career in writing. She took a job as a science writer for the university which led her to freelance feature writing and journalism.

During her college years, Kingsolver actively protested the Vietnam War, marking the start of many years' dedication to social and political change. Her commitment to socially-conscious literature led her to establish, and personally fund, the Bellwether Prize for Fiction in 2000 for novels that address social justice issues. Winners receive \$25,000 and a publishing contract. She continues to work as both an environmental and human-rights activist.

The Bean Trees, Kingsolver's first novel, was published in 1988 to wide critical acclaim. The novel won the Enoch Pratt Library Youth-to-Youth Books Award, the American Library Association Notable Book, and the *New York Times* Notable Book.

The themes of social, political, cultural, and economic injustice permeate the pages of Kingsolver's poems, short stories, essays, and novels. In *The Bean Trees*, the main character, Taylor, is given an unwanted Indian child in a parking lot while passing through the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma. In addition, Taylor meets a family of Guatemalan refugees whose daughter has been taken by their government in a maneuver to get them to speak out against their circle of friends. They escape the potential torture and death of Guatemala yet seem no better off in the United States where they are forced to hide and pretend they do not exist.

In *Animal Dreams* (1990), the protagonist's sister is kidnapped by US-sanctioned Contras while working in Nicaragua promoting sustainable farming practices. In *Pigs in Heaven* (1993), Kingsolver tells the story of a Cherokee child adopted out of her own tribe, thus examining the conflict between individual and community rights. In *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998), Kingsolver addresses the role the United States and other countries played in colonial and post-colonial Africa.

In her most recent novel, *Animal, Vegetable, Miracle* (2007), Kingsolver embarked on a year-long experiment to eat only foods she and her family could grow themselves while exposing the ills of factory-farming and the chemicals and preservatives rampant in processed foods. She has become a vocal advocate for local farming practices.

After spending years living in Tucson, Arizona, Kingsolver has most recently settled on a farm in Emory, Virginia with her husband and two daughters.

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. What social and political views does the author express? What techniques does she use to reveal those views? How do those issues affect the characters?
2. Discuss the significance of the novel's title and the chapter titles.
3. Analyze the role of men in the novel. What does the author's attitude toward men seem to be? Do you think Kingsolver is unsympathetic toward men?
4. Examine the different forms of "family" in the novel.
5. Evaluate the use of first-person point of view in the novel. What other options might the author have considered for point of view and what would the effects of those alternate choices have been?
6. Discuss the concept of "home" in the novel. How much of it is geography and how much is the people who surround you?
7. Explore the role of religion and spirituality. What is the difference between the two as presented in the novel?
8. Compare and contrast the plight of the Guatemalan refugees and the Cherokee Indians.
9. The imagery of birds is prevalent in the novel. What does each symbolize and what role does each play?
10. Compare and contrast Taylor and Lou Ann – as individuals, as mothers, and as women. How do they complement one another?
11. Speculate about an alternate ending where Esperanza and Estevan take Turtle with them and Taylor returns to Tucson alone.
12. Evaluate *The Bean Trees* as a feminist piece of literature.
13. Does the reader ultimately view Taylor as a heroic character? Why or why not?

The Bean Trees

Chapter One: The One to Get Away

1. Explain the significance of the title of the chapter.

2. What is the narrative perspective in this chapter? Explain the effects of this narrative choice. How reliable is this narration likely to be?

3. How does Missy feel about her mother? Characterize their relationship and what that relationship says about Mama's attitude towards motherhood.

4. What is significant about the “two promises” Missy makes to herself when leaving Kentucky?

Chapter Five: Harmonious Space

1. Explain the significance of the extended metaphor in the opening of Chapter Five.

2. Give several examples of Taylor's humor or sarcasm from this chapter and explain what they reveal about her character. What might another reason be for the author to have Taylor use sarcasm?

3. What role does Snowboots play in the chapter with respect to the theme of parenting and how does the cat parallel Lou Ann's character?

4. Analyze key points in the chapter that illustrate Taylor's growing concern and affection for Turtle.

5. Considering the scene between Taylor and Lou Ann, reflect on ways these future roommates will complement one another.

6. How does the Kentucky dialect serve to unify Lou Ann and Taylor in this chapter?

Chapter Ten: The Bean Trees

1. Explain the symbolic significance of the chapter's title.

2. What is the significance of the following quotation: "Turtle woke up in one of those eye-rubbing moods that kids must know by instinct as a means of saving the human species from extinction"?

3. How does Snowboots serve as a reflection of Lou Ann? Give other examples from the chapter of similar behavior. Contrast Taylor's behavior and attitude to Lou Ann's as seen in this chapter.

4. Why has the author waited until now to reveal Edna Poppy's blindness? What purpose does this knowledge serve in the novel?

5. Examine the significance of (a) the cross above Mattie's fireplace (b) Esperanza's name and (c) the contents of the woman's box.

6. Evaluate the advice Taylor gives to Esperanza and what it says about her understanding of the situation.

Chapter Fifteen: Lake o' the Cherokees

1. Analyze the changes—both physical and emotional—that Estevan and Esperanza seem to be undergoing in this chapter. What is suggested by the language Kingsolver uses to describe these changes?

2. Taylor says, "I had changed my own name like a dirty shirt, but I couldn't help them change theirs." Explain why Taylor feels this way.

3. What purposes do Taylor's growing envy of Esperanza and Turtle's closeness serve?

4. What “two American wishes” did Taylor likely make and which one “had the remotest possibility of coming true”?
